



Chapter 10

Flying Over the Mountain

Sandia Crest rises over 5,000 feet above the Rio Grande Valley. The word Sandia is an Indian word meaning watermelon. At sunset, the last rays of the sun often turn the mountain a bright pink color and the shape of the mountain reminds you of a huge slice of watermelon. The picture is deceptively gentle because the western slope facing Albuquerque is steep, rugged and covered with shear rock faces and deep canyons. It is the graveyard for many airplanes and has killed its share of hikers and hang-glider pilots. The eastern side is as different as night from day. The slopes are covered with pine trees, and a steep winding road climbs to a ski area and picnic grounds. In a way it is no less dangerous, but it is a more subtle danger in its lure.

The challenge was to fly over this mountain in a hot air balloon. It had been done many times but, as we drove toward the mountain from across the Rio Grand Valley, we knew that the challenge had taken on a new perspective. The mountain had killed its first balloonists only a few weeks before. A relatively inexperienced pilot and his passenger had been caught in a wind shear and the deflation panel in the top of his balloon had been torn open. No one knew exactly what had happened, but somehow the burners on the balloon were left on and the flames had melted the side of the envelope and finally cut through the tough load tapes that run the length of the envelope and carry the weight of the gondola. The balloon had plunged over 2,000 feet to the desert floor.

George had called about noon. He had flown Sandia Crest several times and had promised Judy and me that we could go with him sometime. Since we had now purchased Sundancer, the number of days we would be flying together would be drawing to a close rather soon.

"I've been checking the weather and the conditions look good to jump the crest," he said. "The Lone Wolf has agreed to go with us and I have a chase crew to meet us on the other side."

I pulled the telephone away from my ear and told Judy. She didn't even hesitate. Certain conditions had to be present for flying the crest with relative safety and these critical conditions usually occurred only a few days each year. If we didn't go this time we might wait a long while before the next opportunity, but this would be the first attempt after the fatal crash.

"All right," I told George. "Which balloon do you want to fly? Yours or mine?"

"It's up to you," he replied. "I feel both of them are equal. You know we stand a chance of getting some damage depending on where we have to land on the far side?"

"I know. Let's go ahead and take Sundancer. I want to go over at least once in our balloon."

The meeting place for the balloons and crews was at the parking lot for an aerial tram that ran to the top of the mountain. We pulled into the area and spotted several crews. Only two balloons were going to try it; the rest of the crews were along to provide extra help. George and the pilot for Lone Wolf were talking to a hang-glider pilot waiting to take the tramcar to the top. As we waited, we watched two more hang-gliders spiral down from the top. The gliders and their pilots launched from a point almost a mile above the valley floor. From there they rode the air currents, turning and banking like giant eagles until they finally had to land on the desert far below.

"The wind is twenty knots at the top," George informed us as he sauntered up to the group. "That guy has made one flight already today and says the air is smooth all the way to the top."

"OK, what's next?" I said, with much more conviction than I felt.

"We will launch south of here someplace. The wind over the

top will carry us slightly north so we will have to compensate for it."

The crews climbed back into the cars and pickups and we drove through the housing areas setting at the foot of the mountain until we came to a horseshoe-shaped canyon. The pilot for the Lone Wolf filled a small toy balloon with helium and released it into the sky. We watched as it drifted upward until it became a small dot and disappeared. The ideal place to cross the crest was through a notch, or saddle, that set well to the south of the highest point of the mountain. There were several places to land in the valley beyond that point. If you drifted any further north, the land on the east side was rugged; in some areas, the roads were as far as fifteen miles apart.

"I think this is going to be the best point to launch," George decided after the helium balloon had disappeared.

The chase crews that were to lead out headed for their trucks. They had to get a good headstart because they had to drive south and up through the canyon where Interstate 40 cut through the mountain, then turn back north to where we would presumably land.

We started to unpack and assemble the two balloons. From time to time I looked up at the mountain as we worked. I hadn't noticed how high it seemed before. The canyons were covered with typical desert growth and large rock outcroppings stood out like fists. Shear rock cliffs rose hundreds of feet into the air and their sharp, pointed, broken tops took on the appearance of knives in my imagination. What was I doing here? I had a wife and three children to look after. Still, the mountain seemed to beckon and almost laugh at my concerns. I took several deep breaths and knew that even though I was scared, I would still go. Soon both balloons were standing upright and the moment of truth had arrived.

"Who's going to go?" George asked. I climbed into the basket and George looked at Judy.

"Do you think we should both go at the same time?" she asked.

"I can't make that decision for you," I replied. "If you are worried about the kids, I think they are old enough to take care of themselves if anything happens."

Judy looked up at the mountain and then back at George and me. Neither one of us said anything. She swallowed twice and then climbed into the gondola. "Let's go," and she reached out and squeezed my hand.

The balloons drifted slowly away from the ground and the people left behind waved and then ran to their cars. They would also attempt to get to the other side in time to meet us. If they didn't make it in time, we had agreed to meet at a cafe after we landed and were picked up by one of the crews sent ahead. George heated the air in the envelope until we were climbing at about 400 feet per minute. We had about 4,000 feet to climb before we could clear the notch we were aiming for. Soon the valley floor was spread out on one side below us. From this height everything looked flat and strange. On the other side the mountainside kept pace with our ascent and, as we drifted by the rock faces and canyons, every detail seemed to stand out in sharp relief.

"How are you doing?" George asked. This was our highest ascent to date.

"This is a hell of a time to ask," I answered in a nervous voice. "I couldn't get out now if I wanted to."

"You could kneel in the bottom of the gondola."

"Not on your life. I'm going to see this every step of the way."

"Both of you hang onto a pair of uprights with both hands then," he instructed. "The winds sometimes do wild things up here."

It was then I noticed George wasn't in his usual perch sitting on the side of the gondola, but had one arm firmly hooked around an upright. I tightened my grip and looked at Judy.

"What sort of things?" she asked, wide-eyed.

"Wind shears can jerk the gondola or a downdraft could drop us a couple of hundred feet in a few seconds," he answered. "The main worry we have is after we have crossed over the top. We don't have the slightest idea what the wind currents will be like on the east side."

The balloon continued to climb until even the side of the mountain receded. We had to be about 500 feet above the proposed crossing point when we picked up the twenty mile per hour wind that would carry us across the top. The balloon

tilted slightly as we crossed into the eastward-moving wind current and we started moving toward the mountain. We were headed toward the north end of the saddle. Lone Wolf was about 300 feet above us and was going to have to climb higher to clear the mountain where he would have to cross.

"If he can't find a south wind on the far side, we may have to spend most of the night trying to find him," George observed and then cocked his head to one side. "Listen to the wind."

The crest of the mountain was approaching, and the sound of the wind moving among the rocks and trees was like listening to a distant waterfall. We swept over the saddle of the notch and two deer looked around as the blast noise from the burner reached their ears. Pines appeared and the whole texture of the mountain seemed to change before our eyes. The ski area appeared in the distance. Lone Wolf had cleared the top and was growing smaller as she appeared to be heading north. We could see the switchback road snaking up the mountain to our left. In the distance I could see the highway that ran north from the Interstate and wondered where the chase crews were and if they had spotted us yet.

"OK," George said with a long breath. "Let's take her down and see what we can find to lead us to a landing place."

The idea was to descend until we found an air current to carry us south. As the sun sets in the west the canyons on the east side of the mountain become shadowed and the air in them cools and becomes heavier and flows toward the valley. If we couldn't find a southerly wind, we would have to get down in a canyon and let the airflow hopefully carry us out to a road or meadow. The balloon was dropping at about 900 feet a minute now, so the size of the pines were growing rapidly. George gave a long extended burn and Sundancer slowed markedly, but we were still dropping toward a canyon. George squeezed the blast valve and propane rushed into the envelope, but no flame appeared.

"FLAMEOUT!" George cried and all three of us grabbed for our pockets.

George shoved the striker into a hole in the side of the burner and began pumping sparks as he gently squeezed the handle of the blast valve to let a gentle stream of propane feed

from the burner. At the same time Judy and I were each folding back a pack of book matches and attempting to strike the first match. If the striker didn't do the job, we would light the whole book of matches and shove it into another opening. One or the other would reignite the burner and relight the pilots.

I was still trying to get my match lit when the beautiful, wonderful sound of roaring flame hit my ears. I looked over the side and the sharp points of the pines seemed to be poking up at us like spears stood on end. Sundancer slowed, then stopped, and we hung in the valley looking up at trees on the slopes on both sides of us.

"Damn! It couldn't have been more than a few seconds, but it seemed like forever," I said as I tried to steady my shaking hands.

"I know," George agreed as he gave the burner another short blast and set the striker back into its pocket on the side of one tank. He looked shook.

We looked at Judy; she smiled at us weakly and put her book of matches back into her pocket. "What happened?"

"The long burn apparently used up all the oxygen around the pilots and put them out," George explained.

"Will it happen again?"

"I don't think so. We should be on just short burns from here on."

Sundancer was climbing gently out of the valley and I became conscious of the beauty surrounding us. As we topped the ridge, I could see the road winding up the next canyon to the north. The pines looked gentle and soft now. The balloon slid down the south slope of the canyon and turned downstream as it caught the flow of air. Just as we were lining up on what appeared to be a good landing site, a gust of air swept us up and out of the canyon and back up the mountain. George fed heat into the envelope and about a hundred feet above the ridge the crosswind started pushing Sundancer north again.

"We aren't getting anyplace," George commented. "If we can't get out of this we are going to have a long flight."

"What do we do now?" Judy was more than a little worried. I didn't have to say anything. I think my worry was showing on my face.

"I think that if we go back into that canyon on a steep angle we can set on the road before we pick up that updraft."

We started our descent of the south slope of the canyon again. The road at this point ran along the north side of the canyon. It had been cut out of the hillside, so steep embankments or cliffs lined the entire north side of the road. We had to hit the near side of the road and, once down, the balloon had to stay put and not drag. If it did we would either hit a cliff or be dragged into some tree. As we descended, a tree loomed in our way just at the edge of the road.

"We are going to have to go through it!" George shouted.

The gondola jerked and tree limbs and branches popped around us. I looked up expecting to see tears in the envelope, but it seemed to be clearing the tree. Suddenly we were free of the tree and the pavement was rushing toward us. A van drove by and people shouted, "They're crashing! They're crashing!" The gondola slammed into the highway and the skirt on the envelope came down around the basket. George was pulling on the ripline as hard as he could. When the envelope rebounded, he was pulled up and almost out of the gondola, but miraculously the balloon did not drag. The envelope tilted and then settled across the road. The van and a pickup stopped and people rushed up to the gondola.

"Are you all right?" someone panted.

"Oh, sure," George laughed. "We just hit that tree to slow us down a little."

"Like hell," I thought. "George, you old faker, you look as pale as the rest of us."